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★ AUG 31 1934 ★

U. S. Department of Agriculture

HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Friday, September 7, 1934.

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "Slippery Dishes From the South." Information from the Bureau of Home Economics, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

--ooOoo--

Some dishes are famous for their special flavor, some for their color, but one well-known American dish is famous for its slipperiness. Long ago Creole cooks in Louisiana invented a hot, rich, savory, meat-and-vegetable combination, something like thick soup. But its distinguishing quality was a slippery consistency, provided by that Southern vegetable okra. As you know, the green pods of okra contain a rather thick slippery juice that comes out in cooking. The slaves in the South called okra by the African term -- gumbo. So they just transferred that word to the dish they concocted of meat and okra. Nowadays we've all heard about ham gumbo and chicken gumbo and shellfish gumbo. As any true Southerner will tell you, the number of gumbo dishes is large. And they're all slippery.

But they're not all made with okra. Someone had the clever idea of using sassafras leaves to thicken gumbo when okra wasn't available. Sassafras has a similar "mucilagenous" quality, as the scientists say, but it also has a special flavor of its own. And dried sassafras is as useful as the fresh leaves. The sassafras tree is a native of the South and a very common one. So, each fall, Louisiana cooks gathered sassafras leaves, dried them in the sun, then ground them to powder, and sifted the powder to remove any stems. The true Louisiana chicken gumbo soup is always thickened with this ground sassafras, often called "file powder." The recipes usually call for about a teaspoon of this powder to six servings of gumbo. And you add it just before taking the soup from the fire.

If you live in a land where the sassafras grows, here's an economy idea for making your winter dishes interesting and different. Dry some sassafras leaves this fall and powder them and put them away in tight cans. Then use the powder to flavor and thicken soup and gumbo mixtures when okra is no longer growing in the garden.

Of course, sassafras has been used in many other ways since early days. This tree has its own particular pleasant flavor. Its various parts -- leaves, bark, root and leaf buds have long been used for medicine, for perfumes and dyes, and for flavoring candy. And, of course, you remember that our grandmothers

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considered sassafras tea a good spring tonic. They brewed the tea from the dried bark or roots. And in the South during the Civil War, when real tea was difficult or impossible to get, people drank sassafras tea as a substitute.

But I'm wandering from the subject. The subject is a dinner with gumbo as the main dish. I want to tell you first how to prepare a delicious beef-and-ham gumbo made with okra and served in a rice ring. If you have a pencil handy, perhaps you'd like to jot down the list of ingredients. If not, you can get a general idea of how this good mixture is made as I read the recipe. Here are the ingredients -- enough to serve a family of six:

- 3/4 pound of cured ham, diced
- 1 pound of beef, diced
- 2 tablespoons of chopped parsley
- 1 onion, sliced
- 1 green pepper, chopped fine
- 1/2 cup of chopped celery
- 1 pint of water
- 1 quart of tomatoes, fresh or canned
- 1 quart of okra, cut crosswise
- Bay leaf or celery if desired
- Salt and pepper to taste.

I'll repeat that list (REPEAT)

First, cook the ham and beef until brown in a large heavy frying pan. Add the parsley, onion, green pepper and celery and cook for a few minutes. Add the water and tomatoes. Cover and simmer until the meat is almost tender. Then add the okra. Season to taste and simmer uncovered until the okra is tender and the stew has thickened. Serve the gumbo in a ring of white, fluffy, boiled rice.

Here's a nice way to fix that rice ring. You'll need 1 cup of rice; 4 cups of water to boil it in; 1 teaspoon of salt for the water; 2 tablespoons of butter and 2 dashes of tabasco sauce. Wash the rice. Then sprinkle it into the rapidly boiling salted water. Cook gently for about 20 minutes -- or until the rice is tender and the water absorbed. Add the seasonings. Put the rice into a well-greased ring mold and pat it down. Reheat in the oven. Turn onto a round platter. Fill the center with the gumbo and serve at once.

That's the main dish. Now for the whole meal. With the beef-and-ham gumbo in a rice ring, serve garden snap beans seasoned with bacon; Corn sticks; Crisp lettuce salad; and Jellied fruit for dessert.

